

## ANDROGYNOUS PLOT IN THE OEUVRE OF Z.N. GIPPIUS AND ITS REFLECTION IN THE NOVEL BY V.V. NABOKOV "THE GIFT"

Vera Vladimirovna Demicheva, Olga Ivanovna Eremenko,  
Tatjana Viktorovna Jakovleva, Valerij Anatoljevich Cherkasov

Belgorod State University, Belgorod (RUSSIA)

DOI: 10.7813/jll.2015/6-2/35

Received: 14 Jan, 2015

Accepted: 04 Mar, 2015

### ABSTRACT

This article considers androgynous plot in fictional prose of Z.N. Gippius, exemplified with the short novel "The mirrors" (1896) and the novel "Roman-tzarevitch" (1913), within the frameworks of studying of creative life model of this prominent representative of Russian Silver Age. Androgynous plot as an creative life allusion by Z.N. Gippius created the base for so-called "History if Yasha Chernyshevskiy", which from hearsay is retold by the main character of V.V. Nabokov's novel "The Gift" F.K. Godunov-Cherdyntsev. This text vividly expresses author's polemical attitude to Z.N. Gippius' creative life ideas, which were pernicious for generation of writers he belonged to.

**Key words:** mythopoetics, androgynism, allusion, imitation, reminiscence

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Problems of androgyny in world literature have old traditions of study, which is evidenced, for instance, by subject bibliography N. T. Bazin "The Concept of Androgyny: a Working Bibliography" [1]. In domestic literary studies they appeared to be the subject of exploratory reflection only in post-Soviet period, when there appeared the possibility to apply approaches that would be free of ideology in order to study creative life of Russian modernistic writers. Thanks to fundamental works of American literary scholar Olga Matich [2,3,4] nowadays readers know in details practice and theory of creative life of one of the most typical representatives of androgynous discourse in the Silver Age – Z.N. Gippius. According to Matich, contemporaries of the poetess noticed in her appearance such androgynous traits like her resemblance to mermaid and vampire ("her flaming sensuous mouth"[2]). At the same time, the researcher makes reference to mythopoetic characteristics of Z.N. Gippius, which was given by A.A. Blok in the poem, dedicated to her. "In an unpublished poem, Blok refers to her as *zelenoglazaja naiada* (Z. Gippius, 1918)" [2]. Zinaida Gippius and her husband D.S. Merezhkovskiy reached out to the idea of triple alliance. In practice they created menage à trois, which also included D.V. Filosofov. This was so-called "spiritual marriage", based on religious views of its members. It was an obvious conation to "The Tripersonal" by association with the Blessed Trinity of Christians. Thus, the Merezhkovskiy and Filosofov actually created a religious community, which should have become the nexus of the New Church. According to Matich, Platonic character of "relationship" of the Merezhkovskiy and Filosofov used ideas of V.S. Solovyov regarding "androgynous collectiveness in love" [4] as a direct source for their connection, which was opposed to procreative love. Z.N. Gippius considered her sex to be undefined and supposed it "aligned with androgynous ideal of V.S. Solovyov" [4], which served motivation for her androgynous strategy of creative life. According to Matich, Zinaida Nikolayevna preferred to call her love as enamourment.

This feeling didn't seek to be realized in sensual relation, regardless of lovers' sex. Z.N. Gippius felt a huge affection to D.V. Filosofov, who was homosexual, i.e., according to her, he was an androgyne because of impossibility of its physical performance [3]. Thus, her ideal was a romantic love, determinant attribute of which, according to D. de Rougemont, was literally impossibility of its implementation [5]. Specific motivation of romantic unimplemented love, according to Z.N. Gippius, was androgynous and homosexual nature of lovers – of herself and her chosen ones [4].

The above-mentioned observations and conclusions about androgynous discourse of Z.N. Gippius, which are important for our work, were made by Matich basing on the analysis of diary and epistolary prose and poems of the authoress, performed by Matich. The researcher didn't touch upon the problem of reflection of androgynous theory and practice of Z.N. Gippius in her fictional prose, and, consequently, she didn't refer to analysis of reception of androgynous literary discourse of the author in belles-lettres of that times. In our work we intend to, first of all, examine androgynous plot of Gippius' short novel "The Mirrors" (1896) and novel "Roman-tzarevitch" (1913) as one of the most exhibit texts for our topic, and, second, to analyze the reception of this plot in novel "The Gift" by Vladimir Nabokov (1937), which was a bottom-line work of Russian period in the oeuvre of the writer.

### 2. THE METHOD

Research discourse of this article is based upon the theory of allusion and imitation. Among the variety of definitions of allusion the one given in "The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics" (1993) suits best for our needs, since it considers such constructive features of this literary device as a rational justification of its application and absence of any boundaries in selection of its sources: "Allusion – A poet's deliberate incorporation of identifiable elements from other sources, preceding or contemporaneous, textual or extratextual" [6]. Numerous sources emphasize that a prerequisite for identification of allusion in the text from the side of the reader is its apperceptive base that is common with the author's one, as well as erudition [6,7]. In our work we consider imitation to be "one of the typical means of reproduction of someone's literary style [...], intention of the imitating person is similar to the strange one that is realized in the style of imitated object, though at the same time it is extremely close to it to the point of indistinguishability... some others' literary work in imitation is used as a model for creation of one's own [...] with keeping of unity and integrity of the style that is being reproduced" [8].

### 3. THE MAIN PART

The main character of the short novel "The Mirrors" Ian Raivich imagines the Earth world as a reflection of the overworld, which is a genuine one, on his opinion. According to Raivich, Earth love brings sufferings to plants, animals and people, making them produce the creatures, similar to themselves, again and again. That's why he feels compassion to those who appeared being involved into the circulation of this Earth feeling – to Olya Lebedeva, Raisa Belozerskaya and Ignatiy Samokhin. This pity is called love by Raivich. Thus, his feeling to Ignatiy is of androgynous character, in accordance with philosophical views of Z.N. Gippius on the nature of love: Ian's appetite to Ignatiy is Platonic one, and it doesn't fade away even when there is no mutuality, there are no boundaries of sex for him, Raisa, who understands Raivich better than the other characters (probably, that's why her name is in tune with the surname of the main character), feels Earth love to him, with its requirements of carnal intimacy and uniqueness of the lover.

Thus, we may observe androgynous love triangle in the short novel: Ian Raivich "spiritually" loves his antipode, Ignatiy Samokhin, whose character are somehow "brutal". The latter one is in love with Raisa in an Earthly way. And Raisa feels Earthly love to Raivich, which is actually incapable to love her back. "The Tripartite Alliance" of the characters is broken by tragic suicide of Ignatiy Samokhin.

Androgynous plot of "Roman-tzarevitch" is based on love triangle as well. The main character, revolutionist Roman Sementsev loves Litta "in an Earthly way". He seeks to satisfy his ambition and conquer the proud-hearted girl. This desire transforms into concupiscency. Finally, he marries her, but right there, he rather "brutally" realizes that marriage. Litta is in love with Sementsev's close associate – Florentiy. In his turn, Florentiy calls Litta a sister. The catastrophe of this androgynous triangle is presented by murder of Sementsev, made by Florentiy with Litta's help, which sent police to the false trail in the name of baron Kurets' captain thanks to her natural behavior and successfully thought out legend about accident that was said to have occurred, since everybody know about friendship between the victim and the murderer. By killing Smentsev, Florentiy and Litta resolved two tasks at a time: first, they punished him for betraying, and, second, they kept peoples' faith in the right nature of revolution, since the killed person was considered as a redemptive sacrifice by his murderers. Thus, Z.N. Gippius contaminated archetypes of Judas and Christ in the image of Roman Smentsev.

Androgynous plot was used by V.V. Nabokov as creation of conventionally called "History of Yasha Chernyshevskiy", one of the cut-in texts, issued from the pen of the main character of "The Gift" – F.K. Godunov-Cherdyntsev. In research literature we may find numerous prototypes of Yasha Chernyshevskiy, a fledgling poet who committed suicide [9]. However, we are not aware of any references to creative-life model of Z.N. Gippius as a narrative pattern of "The history...". Meanwhile, Nabokov's novel contain prosaic allusions on authoress' androgyny, which is considered as a literary device. Here is the portrait of the heroine from "The history of Yasha Chernyshevskiy": "the eyes of marine shade and a huge red mouth" [10], with "bloody lips" [10]. Besides, the characters of "The history..." Yasha Chernyshevskiy, Olya G and Rudolf Bauman are connected by relations, which fantastically remind of "the triple alliance" of the Merezhkovskiy and D.V. Filosofov, as well as the characters of abovementioned literary works of Z.N. Gippius. Indeed, Yasha felt an androgynous affection to Rudolf, which is evident even in the following record in his diary: "My blood boils, my hands get cold like I'm a grammar-school girl, when we stay alone with each other [...]" [10]. Olya is in love with an androgyne Yasha Chernyshevskiy, who is unable to return her love. And Rudolf, Yasha's antipode, is in love with Olya, who resembles "brutal" characters of Z.N. Gippius. The love of characters from "The Gift" are contradictory: their souls are torn between the aspiration to implement it and some taboo, put on probability of this implementation. The most "earthly" character – Rudolf – once goes under this huge tension and tries to rape Olya. However, he was unable to break the boundaries of Platonic love, and his action became a signal for the other participants of androgynous triangle to seminal action. All of them lost faith in possibility of "spiritual love" in earthly conditions. It was Olya G., as allusion on androgynous creative-life model of Z.N. Gippius, who played key role in implementation of the idea of collective suicide for the sake of recovery of "genuine" heavenly love, which was dreamt of by the characters of "The Mirrors": "[...] the thought that they all three could disappear, so that that ideal and immaculate circle could restore in an unearthly way, was developed by Olya the most ardently [...]" [10]. Finally, "the triple alliance" of the characters broke up in the same tragic way we could have already seen in works of Z.N. Gippius – by Yasha's suicide. However, some motifs of "The History of Yasha Chernyshevskiy", which are reminiscences of the novel "Romain-Tzarevitch", written by Gippius, reveal here "detective" implication, which allows reclassify case about Yasha's suicide into his murder by Olya G. and Rudolf.

First, Yasha, as Roman Smentsev, at the supreme moment "betrays" the idea, in this case – the idea of "meeting above". There was a farewell message, left by Yasha for his parents, which obviously written not by "a fanatic": "Mommy, daddy, I'm still alive and I'm terrified, please forgive me" [10]. This "betrayal" was most likely the reason for Olya G. and Rudolf to kill him, like it happened with Florentiy and Litta. If that is a case, in Yasha's image we see the allusion of typical for Gippius contamination of archetypes of Judas and Christ (victim) in the face of Roman Smentsev. Second, Yasha's murder happened as much spontaneously as it happened in "Roman-Tsarevitch". Suspectably long stay of Olya and Rudolf in the rainy forest, in complete darkness, may be explained by Olya's efforts to make up a verisimilar version of Yasha's suicide. Their emotional state in the episode of giving witness to "suspicious" sergeant-major – hysterics under the pretence of "childish abandonment" [10] is an allusion in Litta's behavior, who make efforts for throwing captain for a loop (who is, by the way, German as well, and he was rather suspicious and pedantic baron Kurets).

### 4. SUMMARY

Thu, genetically Gippius' literary model of "The History of Yasha Chernyshevskiy" allows interpreting this text as a story already created by someone else, which however didn't suit F.K. Godunov-Cherdyntsev as a material for forethought novel because of its evident imitation. There is still a question: who could be the author of "The History of Yasha Chernyshevskiy", which was retold by F.K. Godunov-Cherdyntsev? All this could have been known by two characters who survived – Olya G. and Rudolf Bauman. However, the latter was a German and that's why her story couldn't reflect such saturation with specifically Russian and very subtle allusions of Gippius' literary prose (which in many ways varied motives of such novels of F.M. Dostoyevsky like "The Idiot" and "Demons"), creative-life texts of the Merezhkovskiy, knowledge of historic and cultural shades of Russian Silver Age. Moreover, he preferred hockey to polite literature. There is only one person left – Olya G., the image of which is an emblem of androgynous creative-life discourse of Z.N. Gippius.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Ideas of the death that brings salvation from the earthly bondage, oppositeness of the earthly, "sordid" and the heavenly, "sublime" words, unities in other-worldliness are as old as the European civilization and go through symbolists and romantics to Gnostics and Platon. However, specific triple unity gives reference to creative-life discourse of Silver Age, and, in particular, to discourse of Z.N. Gippius. Androgynous plot is a constructive element for her literary prose, that is considered to be as a unite text. Tragic final of the "triple alliance" in V.V. Nabokov's novel "The Gift" is polemical with reference to the idea of about androgynous enamourment as a base for relationships of the "new people". Undivided love turned into a torture for the characters of "The History of Yasha Chernyshevskiy", which made them searching for the way out in heaven. According to V.V. Nabokov, androgynous creative-life ideas of Z.N. Gippius stimulated suicidal inclinations in young poets, like Yasha Chernyshevskiy, thickening unbearable for life tragic atmosphere of decadent outlook.

## REFERENCES

1. Bazin, N., T., 1974. The Concept of Androgyny: a Working Bibliography. *Women's Studies*, 2: 217-235.
2. Matich, O., 1992. Dialectics of Cultural Return: Zinaida Gippius' Personal Myth. In *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, Eds., B. Gasparov, R.P. Hughes and I. Paperno. Berkeley Univ. of California Press, pp: 52-72.
3. Matich, O., 1993. Zinaida Gippius: Theory and Praxis of Love. In *Readings in Russian Modernism*, Eds., Ronald Vroon, John E. Malmstad. Moscow Nauka Oriental Literature Publishers, pp: 237-250.
4. Matich, O., 2008. Erotic Utopia: the Decadent Imagination in Russia's Fin de Siècle. *Moscow Novoje Literaturnoe Obozrenije*, pp: 400.
5. Rougemont, D., de, 1983. *Love in the Western World*. Princeton Univ. Press, pp: 392.
6. Preminger, A., Brogan T.V.F., 1993. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Eds., Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton, New Jersey Princeton Univ. Press, pp: 1383.
7. Kozitskaya E.A., 1999. Sense-making function of quotation in poetic text: Manual for special course. Tver. Tver National University. pp.: 140.
8. Tamarchenko, N.D., 2008. Imitation. Poetics of words, actual terms and notions. Ed., N.D. Tamarchenko. Moscow. Publishing house of Kulagina, Intrada, pp.: 172-173.
9. Dolinin, A.S., 2000. [Notes]. In *Vladimir Nabokov Collected Russian Language Works In Five Volumes Volume Four*. Saint-Petersburg, Symposium, pp.: 634-768.
10. Nabokov, V.V., 1997. *The Gift*. Saint-Petersburg, Publishing house 'Azbuka', Book club "Terra", pp.: 416.